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AUTHOR Swick, Kevin J.; Parker, Margaret S.
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ABSTRACT

The involvement of 61 at-risk parents in a teacher-parent partnership project which was implemented among families of kindergarteners and first graders in three poor, rural school districts in South Carolina was assessed. Core questions were: (1) What are the parents' participation levels and patterns of home and school learning? (2) What is the relationship between parents' involvement and their perceptions of how they benefited from involvement? Also explored were influences related to parental participation. Data was gathered by means of the Parent Participation Record, the Parent's Perception of Parent Involvement questionnaire, and anecdotal records. Findings concerning the first question indicated which school had the highest parent participation. Findings also showed that the fewest recorded parent participations occurred in October, the most in March. The average number of parent participations for the year was seven. Home visits and informal parent involvement were the activities in which the largest number of parents participated. There were significant differences between schools in levels of parent participation in conferences, participation in the classroom, home learning activities, and informal involvement. Data on the second question revealed five significant correlations between participation variables and parents' perceptions of the benefits of their involvement. (RH)

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Participation Patterns And Perceived Benefits Of At-Risk Parents Involved In A Teacher-Parent Partnership Effort

Kevin J. Swick
University of South Carolina

Margaret S. Parker
Varnville Elementary School

ED323033

The significant role of parents in their children's learning and development has been a consistent theme in the early childhood literature for several decades (Graves & Swick, 1986). A multitude of studies have documented the impact parents have on the child's earliest learning (Lazar, 1981; Gordon, 1977; Galinsky, 1987; Powell, 1989). Further, considerable research has described the negative influence of parents nonparticipation or worse their pathological involvement with young children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986). So far reaching are these influences (parent upon child, both at home and school) that as the family's societal status has eroded, researchers have increased their attention on how to engage parents more effectively with their children's education.

Recent attention to children's earliest experiences in "formal schooling" (typically kindergarten and first grade) has focused on the vital role of parents in supporting the child's successful efforts (Comer, 1986). Failure during these earliest school experiences has been correlated with children's long-term learning difficulties and has been clearly related to parental nonparticipation and/or severe family dysfunction (Anastasiow, 1988; Bloom, 1981; Comer, 1986; Epstein, 1985). It appears that based upon their involvement with the child during the preschool years, parents form (or fail to create) a "partnership" with the child with regards to negotiating extended experiences in the school and community. Through involvement with the school this partnership is broadened to a triad (parent-child-teacher), thus strengthening the child's learning system (Swick, 1987; Henderson, 1988). When this broadened partnership fails to materialize or evolves into a negative system the results are traumatic for child and parent. This is especially so in the case of families already "at-risk" (Burchard & Burchard, 1987). While a lack of parental involvement is detrimental to any child's learning and development, it is especially harmful to children who have already experienced multiple pathologies (Pence, 1988).

Both parent education and parent involvement then can provide the needed direction for strengthening the success potential of at-risk children and families (Swick,

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1987; Powell, 1989). **A critical challenge, however, has been the effective involvement of parents who typically elect not to participate in traditional school sponsored programs** (Epstein, 1986; Swick, 1989) and also often maintain considerable psychological (if not physical) distance from community services in general (Sigel, 1985). A variety of factors have been identified that are related, at least in theory, to the poor involvement patterns of at-risk parents: cultural differences, fear of authority based institutions, illiteracy, family pathologies, past failures in schools, job-related requirements, negative attitudes toward schools, and a lack of resources needed for participation (Ascher, 1988; Cataldo, 1987). It has been shown that the earlier in the parent's development these obstacles are overcome the better the chances are of altering the involvement patterns of at-risk parents for the positive (Comer, 1986). The challenge is to identify the obstacles to effective parent involvement and design exploratory schemes for resolving these issues (Epstein, 1986).

Focus of Study

The goal of this study was to **describe the participation patterns and perceived benefits of the involvement of at-risk parents in a planned teacher-parent partnership program** (kindergarten/first grade) as implemented in three poor rural school districts in South Carolina. In addition, **the patterns and levels of parent involvement were correlated with parents' perceptions of their involvement** and the benefits of that involvement. The following were the major questions studied:

1. What are the participation levels and patterns of home and school learning in parents of kindergarten and first-grade children resulting from their involvement in home/school training and involvement activities?

2. What is the relationship between parents' levels and patterns of involvement in home/school training and involvement activities of kindergarten/first-grade children and the parents' perceptions of themselves with regards to the benefits of their involvement?

In exploring these questions another goal was to **assess some of the factors influencing parental choices** regarding their levels and patterns of involvement.

Terminology

The term "at-risk" is used to cover multiple factors and influences that place parents and children in situations that threaten their integrity. In the context of this

study, **"at-risk" parents were defined** as parents whose children were judged "not ready" to benefit from the school experience (as determined by a combination of test scores and teacher judgment), qualified for the free lunch program, and were recommended by the teacher as being in need of intervention.

The term **parental involvement** also has many definitions. In this study it was defined as any activity in which the parent engages to prepare for or was supportive of the child for home or school learning. In terms of this investigation such activities included participation in: home visits, parent training sessions, home learning activities, in-classroom involvement, conferences, use of a computer "home-loan" program, and a category titled "informal involvement".

The Teacher-Parent Partnership Program

The program, **A Teacher-Parent Partnership To Enhance School Success,** was designed to involve teachers and at-risk parents in carrying out a key concepts school-home curriculum with kindergarten and first-grade children. Through a collaborative effort of the University of South Carolina's College of Education, the Salkehatchie Consortium of Schools, IBM, and the participating school districts, it was hoped that the participation of at-risk children and parents in school activities could be strengthened. The project was supported by a grant from the U.S. Office of Education's FIRST program. The basic premise of the project was that **by strengthening teacher and parent skills and support resources as well as their partnership, at-risk children's school functioning would improve.** The program contained three basic elements: strengthen and use a **key concept areas curriculum** in kindergarten and first-grade and extend it into the child's home learning through parental involvement/education; develop and use a system for **extending the key concept areas curriculum into the home**; and to plan and implement **a teacher-parent partnership** arrangement in carrying out project activities.

The project's design was based on the use of **home-school-workers** (trained paraprofessionals) as liasons and coordinators of the development and use of the teacher-parent partnership approach. Teacher participants provided the in-classroom instruction and carried out parent involvement strategies within the project's overall framework. Parents agreed to become involved in at least some of the project's parent education and involvement activities (their contract with the project called for a minimum of one participation per month).

Training was a central aspect of the program's structure. Teachers were involved in key concept areas curriculum training, parent involvement/education sessions, special training on home learning and school-family communications, and

computer and non-computer curriculum/instruction strategies. **A thread integral in all of this training was a focus on working with at-risk children and parents.** Home-School-Workers received training in the following areas: skills for working with at-risk families, coordination and management sessions, materials on home learning and strategies for extending the school curriculum into the home; working with at-risk children, parent education planning, and sessions on skills for building teacher-parent partnerships. Parents were engaged in **educational/training** efforts that included: family management strategies, a focus on language and math learning, sessions on the key concept areas curriculum, and topical sessions on children's learning of behavior, computer literacy activities, and related home learning strategies. In addition, parents were involved in sessions that focused on working with teachers, using community resources, and carrying out specific home learning activities.

The key concept areas curriculum focused on: language, math, social responsibility, and expressive communication skills. Teachers and Home-School-Workers were involved in the development of the curriculum framework, selection and use of curriculum resources and activities, and in the deployment of the curriculum in the classroom and through home learning extension strategies. Computer instruction was an important part of the instructional process and teachers/home-school-workers were involved in the planning, software selection, and integration of it into the program. Parents were involved in curriculum education through parent education sessions, home visits, and through individual in-school activities. **Each classroom had a defined learning area that included materials and activities specific to the project and for use as a home learning center.**

Strong school/family involvement was a continuing goal of the program. All aspects of the project (training, curriculum, parent involvement/education, instructional strategies/resources, and teacher-parent interactions) were designed to support this goal. Teachers and home-school-workers collaborated on using various strategies to reach this goal: conferences, home-visits, home learning activities, in-classroom involvement of parents, a parenting tape library, parent computer literacy sessions (including a computer home loan program) parent education sessions, and informal parent involvement opportunities. In addition, various approaches were used to gain maximum parent involvement: provisions for child care at training sessions, use of transporation for parents lacking this resource, flexible scheduling of parent activities, use of videotapes of parent training sessions, adaptation of involvement strategies to meet individual needs of parents, multiple offerings of the same session, and other such activities.

Specific parent involvement/education opportunities were included in the program on a regular basis. **Home-School-Workers** (one at each school site) coordinated and carried out the parent involvement activities with the guidance of the project director and the support of participating teachers. The following is a summary review of the project designed parent involvement/education opportunities.

•**Conferences** were held on a "as needed" basis with parents; teacher-parent, home/school/worker-parent, or a combination of the three parties. Conferences were held at the school or via telephone depending on the parent's needs and desires.

•**Home-visit opportunities** were offered once a month (or more if needed) during the project. All parents participated in an orientation home visit (unless family situations precluded this, then a conference by phone was held). Home visits focused on alerting parents to the need for their involvement, carrying out parent training on specific home learning activities, responding to parent requests for particular project materials (such as the videotaped parent programs or for loaning a computer over night), and to conduct parent training on topics parents needed or requested.

•**Parent training sessions** were held beginning in November, 1989 and continued through May, 1990. A total of eight topics were covered in these sessions. Topics included all of the skills covered in the key concept areas curriculum plus computer literacy training and family management skill training. Sessions were held at flexible times (offered at different times for each topic; often topics were repeated two or more times) and they were videotaped so parents unable to attend could later view and discuss them. **Home-school-workers and teachers were present in all of the sessions.**

•**Home learning extension activities** were offered on a daily basis so parents could interact with their children on materials related to concepts they were learning in school. Parents checked out the materials/activities and completed a brief feedback form upon returning them the next day. **Materials and activities were housed in home learning extension centers** in each of the project's classrooms.

•**In-classroom involvement** opportunities were encouraged by the home-school-workers and teachers in their interaction with the parents. These opportunities ranged from parents helping their child learn an activity to working with other children both individually and in small groups. Parents also helped with field trips, organizing classroom learning materials, and other helpful projects.

•**Computer learning "home loan" materials (hardware and software)** were made available to parents. All parents were first trained in using the computer.

Training sessions were included in the parent training component of the program. Parents could borrow the computer (and software) for one night on a first come, first serve basis.

***Informal parent involvement** was also carried out; this included drop-in visits by parents at the school, participation in organizing some of the parenting programs, assisting teachers with clerical work, and related activities.

Description of the Population

Subjects for the study were drawn from kindergarten and first-grade children from a Consortium of schools located in the south central region of South Carolina. Three school districts from the Consortium (the three identified as most in need per children not ready for school, percentage of children who qualified for the free lunch program, and percentage of adults not completing high school) were selected for participation in the program. Each school district selected an elementary school in their district to serve as the site school for the project (three site schools in total). **Eighty eight children and their parents** were initially involved in the project. Two subjects were eliminated because of relocation; five began the program too late to have adequate data on them and were not included in the study; one person dropped out; and data on nineteen of the participants was incomplete. **Thus, a sample size of sixty-one comprised the population of the study**.

All of the children/parents were selected for participation because they met the "at-risk" criteria identified for the program. Indeed all of them were identified (in addition to project criteria) by the building principals as clearly in need of urgent support. **Table 1** provides an overview of the population for each of the three participating schools.

Table 1

SAMPLE SIZE BY SCHOOL

School	Frequency	Percent
1	27	44.3
2	24	39.3

As the table indicates the largest percentage of participants were from School 1. The smallest percentage were from school 3. Data from School 3 was incomplete on parent questionnaires. Parent participants were typically single parents who were minority, below the poverty level in income, and whose children were judged as not ready for school. Specifically, 86 percent were minority, 48 percent lacked a high school diploma, and 67 percent were single parents.

Design And Instrumentation

The design of this study was descriptive and narrative, specifically examining the variables of parent participation levels and patterns in especially designed parent involvement/education activities (offered by the project), and parental perceptions of the benefits of their participation as related to their involvement in these project activities. A related focus of this descriptive effort was to explore the various factors related to participation or nonparticipation of at-risk parents in the project designed activities.

To measure the variables of parental levels and patterns of involvement in the project's activities, **The Parent Participation Record** (an instrument used for quantifying and categorizing parental participation rates) was developed. This form was used by the Home-School-Worker in each of the three participating schools to **document not only the number of parental involvement activities for each parent but to also record the types** (for determining patterns of involvement, if any) of parental involvement. Parent participation activities included: (l) home visits conducted by the HSW's, (2) parent conferences held with the teacher or an HSW, (3) in-classroom parent involvement with children on learning activities, (4) home learning activities with the child, (5) attendance at project sponsored parent training sessions, and/or (6) informal parent involvement such as interaction via a phone call or other form of communication. Data was collected (using this form) from the sites beginning in October of 1989 through May 30 of 1990.

To assess parental perceptions of the benefits of their involvement in various project sponsored activities **The Parent's Perceptions of Parent Involvement** inventory was especially designed and used in the project. Through a review of the literature (see Powell, 1989 & Pence, 1988) ten items were designed to acquire parent feedback on the value of different parent involvement/education activities. The instrument was designed to provide parents with an opportunity to assess their views of their growth as related to their parental involvement during the project. The ten

items focused on parental perceptions of: their level of involvement in their child's education, their level of school involvement, their use of home learning activities, their communication level with their child's teacher, the benefit of their involvement, their relationships with their child, their knowledge of child development, their level of self confidence as a parent, their level of participation in the project, and their partnership with their child and the child's teacher. **The instrument was administered as a post-project assessment in May of 1990.** It has a reliability of .77 based on a test-retest piloting of the inventory with 86 graduate students in the fall of 1989.

Home-School-Worker narratives (daily project diary-records) were used to acquire information on the nuances of the various factors involved in parental participation levels and patterns. The kinds of information gathered and recorded in these daily diaries included: explanations by parents of their participation or lack of in different activities, observations of HSW's of parent behaviors in different in activities, responsiveness of parents to various involvement activities, use of different activities and resources by parents, specific parent needs and concerns as they were related by parents to HSW's in informal discussions, observations by HSW's of parental interactions with their children and the child's teacher, and various other informal parent involvement or communication activities as noted by the HSW's. These narratives proved to be a rich source of information on issues not easily identified by the more formal assessments used in the project. These narratives also included HSW notes on their observations of teacher-involvements in the project as related to the teacher-parent partnership mission.

Data Collection And Analysis

The data for this **descriptive/analytic** study was collected during the 1989-90 school year. In particular, data collection on parental involvement levels and patterns was kept by the Home-School-Workers beginning in October, 1989 and completed in May of 1990.

Data related to the first question, **the parents' levels and patterns of involvement...** was collected through the use of a record keeping system that tracked parental participation in training, education and involvement activities. The instrument, **The Parental Participation Record,** allowed HSW's to record and measure parent participation on a monthly basis. Parent participation was categorized into six types of involvement: 1) home visits, 2) conferences (with teachers or HSW's), 3) in-classroom parent involvement, 4) home learning activities by parents, 5) training

sessions involvement, and 6) informal parent involvement. The results were studied for patterns of frequency and levels of involvement within each type of participation, for each month of treatment and for the total participation for all months. **HSW's narrative reports on their observations** related to levels and patterns of parental involvement were also integrated into the data analysis process.

Data on the second question, **which dealt with the relationship between parents' levels and patterns of involvement in activities and their perceptions of the perceived benefits of the project**, was tested using the Pearson correlation procedure. The .05 level of significance was used throughout the study. The questionnaire (**The Parents Perceptions of Parent Involvement**) and the monthly participation records were coded to allow for matching of parents' scores on the two instruments.

Data Presentation And Findings

Based on the data gathered by the HSW's (using **The Parent Participation Record**), the participation levels and patterns of home and school learning involvement for the parents in the project were determined. Each parents participation in each category of involvement was recorded by the HSW's or the classroom teachers. **Table 2** provides an overall picture of the total participation by parents in project sponsored activities for each month of the school year.

Table 2

Mean And Standard Deviations For Total Mean Participation (N=61)

Month	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
October	1.48	1.31	0	8
November	5.43	2.65	0	13
December	4.89	3.00	0	15

January	5.89	2.31	1	12
February	5.21	3.95	0	20
March	7.54	4.15	0	22
April	4.95	3.56	0	18
May	3.82	2.22	0	12

An analysis of the data in Table 2 indicates that March was the month with the largest number of parent participations (mean of 7.54 per parent). October, being a start-up month, had the lowest number of parent participations (mean of 1.48 per parent). The other months, with the exception of May, averaged five or six parent participations per month. May was "child testing" month in the participating schools and parental participation dropped to a mean number of 3.82 participations. Anecdotal data gleaned from interviews with the teachers and building principals involved in the school indicates that the monthly levels of parent participation and total number of participations for the year (mean total of 39.21 participations per parent) were significantly higher for "at-risk" parents than in any prior school year. Further, an assessment of the individual parent participation records indicate that some parents exceeded 80 participations for the year while no parent had fewer than 8 participations.

The data indicate that the interest and enthusiasm of parents in project sponsored activities was very high. When October (the start-up month) and May (child testing month) are put aside, no month had less than a total mean number of 4.50 participations per parent. **Some observations on the data as related to parent participation levels and project activities are summarized as follows:**

*High levels of parent participation are not likely during "start-up" activity periods.

*Computer learning activities appeared to influence a significant increase in parent participations (February and March Total Mean Participations averaged 6.37; the highest levels of participation in the project).

*School and holiday events such as testing, vacations, spring breaks, and personal life activities appear to decrease the levels of parent participation in school activities and in home learning experiences (the total mean scores for participation during these

times, which included December, April, and May, was 4.50).

*The involvement of all parents in some form of parent participation was attained in only one month, January.

*High levels of parent participation in school and home learning activities is best attained when the activities are of high interest (for example: computer training) and when both parents and school personnel have the time-span, resources, and support to become engaged in such activities.

The data presented in **Table 3 provides a review of the "patterns" of parental involvement in different types of participation opportunities per month.** An analysis of these patterns of involvement is instructive regarding the project's emphases at different times, parental preferences for types of involvement, and a plethora of other issues.

Table 3

OVERALL MONTHS AND TOTAL PARENT PARTICIPATION

Month	Home Visit	Conference	In-Classroom Participation	Home Activities	Training	Informal Involvement
Oct.	0.48	0.21	0.07	0.00	0.00	0.72
Nov.	1.02	0.89	0.84	0.34	0.74	0.74
Dec.	1.02	0.59	0.75	0.43	0.61	1.51
Jan.	1.11	0.52	0.49	0.69	0.77	2.30

Feb.	0.92	0.77	0.61	0.84	0.61	1.48
Mar.	1.20	0.98	0.74	1.05	0.87	2.70
Apr.	1.02	0.44	0.48	0.66	0.41	1.95
May	0.97	0.38	0.46	0.31	0.33	1.38

While analysis of the data is very helpful in gaining insight on the patterns and levels of parent participation in different involvement types, it should be kept in mind that **in some categories the opportunities for participation were dictated by the number of times an activity was offered.** For example, in the category of **parent training** there were eight sessions offered during the year. On the surface it might appear that parent participation in this category was low when in fact it was quite high. The total mean participations per program year was 4.34, indicating that parents attended over half of the sessions offered. A similar situation existed with the category of **conferences.** While conferences were available upon request, they were only offered on a formal basis twice during year. Yet the total mean average of parent participations in this category for the year was 4.38. This would indicate that many parents were involved in many self-initiated conferences with the HSW's or teachers.

The data indicates that to some degree **parental participation was influenced by the emphases being carried out by project personnel** at different points in the year. **Informal involvement**, for example, was the highest participation category in October when start-up activities were emphasized. It was also the highest participation category in several of the other months (December, January, February, March, April, May), reflecting two very clear aspects of the project: 1) HSW's made many informal contacts with parents to gain their involvement in project activities, and 2) parents made many informal contacts with HSW's and teachers related to their participation in the project. Indeed, the total mean average parent participation in this category for the year was 12.78. Other indicators of this relationship are found in **home learning activities** where January, February, and March were months in which this aspect of the project was emphasized; and in the **home visit** category where January, March, and April were months of high activity in this area.

The data also indicates that **parental participation in home visits, conferences, home learning activities, and training sessions increased over the project year** until April and May when school-wide testing and project evaluation tasks took place. This finding was confirmed by the HSW's in their anecdotal records on project observations. Some of their observation notes provide insights into this process:

*As parents became more comfortable with the role and function of the HSW's, they became more involved in the home visits.

*As parents gained in confidence in their important role in the project, they visited and participated in more in-classroom activities.

*Parent requests for conferences increased as they had more questions regarding how to carry out different home learning activities; this was especially the case with the computer learning aspect of the project.

*Participation in parent training sessions increased as support services like child care and transportation became known to them. Computer literacy training was also a major influence in the increase of parent participation in these training programs.

There were marked differences in the overall parent participation levels among the three schools as well as differences in patterns of involvement in the different types of participation. **Table 4** provides information on the differences in parent participation levels in the three schools.

Table 4

SUMMARY OF MEANS FOR TOTAL PARENT PARTICIPATION IN THE THREE SCHOOLS

	N	Mean
School 1	26	36.73
School 2	23	46.61
School 3	10	32.40

As the data in **Table 4** indicate, School 2 averaged more parent participation for the total project year (46.61). School 1 (36.73) and School 3 (32.40) averaged within approximately four participations of each other. The total participation levels of the three schools were significantly different [$F = 3.48$, $df = (2.56)$, $p < 0.05$]. **School Two** (mean 46.61) had significantly higher participation levels than School Three (mean

32.40) but not signficantly higher than School 1 (mean 36.73).

The low participation level in School 3 has several elements: it had (among participating parents) the fewest number of high school graduates, the highest percentage of minority participants, a past record of poor parental involvement, and inadequate record keeping of project activities. Additional insights regarding differences in parental participation patterns is protrayed in **Table 5.**

Table 5

SUMMARY OF MEANS FOR TOTAL PARTICIPATION IN VARIOUS INVOLVEMENT CATEGORIES

Category	School 1	School 2	School 3
Home Visits	7.04	8.61	7.80
Conferences	1.04	10.04	2.10*
School Participation	0.46	8.30	6.70*
Home Learning	4.27	6.78	0.70*
Training	4.12	5.04	3.50
Informal Involvement	19.81	7.83	11.60*

***p < 0.05**

As the data in **Table 5** indicate patterns of **parental participation in home visits was similar in all three of the schools.** Parents participated in an average of one home visit per month which was part of the program's design. Parents in School 2 had a slightly higher level (not significant) of home visits; most likely this corresponded to the geographical proximity of parents to the school and to their overall level of high participation in other categories. **There was a signficant difference in patterns of participation in conferences (1 = 1.04, 2 = 10.04, 3 = 2.10).**

School 2 had a significantly higher participation rate than School 1 or School 3. This extreme difference included three elements: 1) School 2 was the only school in the project that had required conferences. 2) the HSW in School 2 conferenced often with parents when they came to the school, and 3) the teachers in this school had already established "conferencing" as their primary parent involvement technique. The other influential factor was the overall high involvement level of parents in all participation categories.

In-classroom participation levels were also distinctly different in the participating schools (1 = 0.46, 2 = 8.30, 3 = 6.70). School 1 had the lowest level of parent participation in "in-classroom" activities. Both School 2 and School 3 had significantly higher levels of participation in this involvement category. The major reason for this significant difference was the geographical proximity of parents to Schools 2 and 3. In the schools where in-classroom participation was high, many of the parents who were involved in this activity on a consistent basis lived very close to the school (this observation was confirmed by anecdotal records of the HSW's). Parents involved in School 1 lived further distances from the school. In addition, many parents lacked the transportation, job-flexibility, and/or self-image needed for joining in this aspect of the parent involvement effort. A meta-analysis of individual records of each parents pattern of parent involvement indicate that parents were either highly active in in-classroom involvement (with some accumulating 35 or more participations) or not involved in this category at all.

Significant differences in parental involvement in carrying out home learning activities existed among the schools. **None of the schools achieved a high level of home learning activity involvement except in the area of computer learning.** Schools 1 and 2 did achieve moderate levels of involvement (4.27 and 6.78) with some parents completing 20 or more home learning activities during the year. Most parents in these two schools completed about 3 home learning activities per month. Participation in this area of involvement was very low in School 3 (0.70). However, parent initiatives in School 3 were low in most of the categories.

Participation in project sponsored parent training sessions was about the same in all three schools. Most parents participated in at least half of the sessions with a significant number of parents attending 6 or more of the 8 sessions. Schools 1 and 3 had the highest levels of "informal" parent involvement. In particular, School 1 used various informal means of involvement (telephone calls, letters, notes home, newsletters, and other modes) to meet the needs of the many parents who lived significant differences from the school.

In effect, **there were variations in the patterns of parental involvement among the three schools.** All of the schools had consistency of involvement in the home-visit and parent training activities. Beyond this, schools seemed to find the kinds of involvement (conferences, home learning, etc.) most suited to their parents through the process of interacting with them and providing them with choices with regards to their participation.

With regards to the levels and patterns of parents' involvement and their perceptions of the benefits of this involvement, the data provides several insights. Data from the **Parent Participation Record** and **The Parent's Perceptions of Parent Involvement** questionnaire were used in generating the findings for this aspect of the study. The total means for all subjects were calculated for each of the ten items on **The Parent's Perceptions of Parent Involvement (PPPI).** These mean scores were correlated with the mean scores for all participants on each of the categories of participation. **Table 6** shows the means and standard deviations for parent responses to the **PPPI. Table 7** shows the Pearson Correlation Matrix of the **PPPI** scores and the mean scores of parent participation in each of the parent involvement categories. As the data in **Table 7** indicate, there were **five signficant correlations** between participation variables and questions pertaining to parents' perceptions of their parental involvement. The correlations are briefly reviewed as follows.

"Number of home visits" was significantly correlated with question five which stated "As a parent of a child in Project FIRST, I have benefitted greatly from being a part of the project." ($r = -28$, $p < .05$)

"Number of school (in-classroom) participations" was significantly correlated with question two which stated, "As a parent of a child in Project FIRST, I have been more involved in classroom and school activities this year than last year." ($r = -0.27$, $p < .05$)

"Number of school (in-classroom) participations" was significantly correlated with question five which stated, "As a parent of a child in Project FIRST, I have benefitted greatly from being a part of the project. ($r = -0.26$, $p < .05$)

"Number of home learning activities" was significantly correlated with question nine which stated, "I have participated in Project FIRST activities weekly." ($r = -0.30$, $p < .05$)

"Number of training sessions" was significantly correlated with question five which stated, "As a parent of a child in Project FIRST, I have benefitted greatly from

being a part of the project." ($r = -0.28$, $p < .05$)

While not signficant there was a pattern of relationships suggested by the data between total number of parent participations and perceived benefits of one's involvement in the project; between number of home visits and degree of involvement of parents in the child's education; between number of home visits and degree of knowledge of how children learn/develop; between number of conferences and degree of relationships with the child; between number of training sessions and degree of use of home learning activities; and between number of informal involvements and degree of relationships with the child.

Table 6

SUMMARY OF MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
1. Degree of involvement of parent in child's education.	1.37	0.64	1	3
2. Degree of involvement of parent in classroom and school.	1.55	0.71	1	3
3. Degree of use of home learning.	1.38	0.64	1	3
4. Degree of communication with child's teacher.	1.28	0.56	1	3
5. Degree of benefit from Project First.	1.25	0.51	1	3
6. Degree of relationships with child.	1.25	0.43	1	3
7. Degree of knowledge of how children develop and learn.	1.14	0.44	1	3
8. Degree of confidence in self as parent.	1.17	0.38	1	3
9. Degree of participation in Project First.	2.43	1.04	1	3
10. Better partner with the teacher and child as result of project.	1.05	0.23	1	3

Note: The response code for this instrument is lower for more positive responses

In effect, there were relationships between the levels and kinds of parents' participation and their perceptions of the benefits of being involved in the project. In particular, home visits, school/in-classroom participations, home learning activities, and training sessions were significantly correlated with specific parental perceptions of benefits to their program participation.

Table 7

PEARSON CORRELATION MATRIX

Questions on Parent's Perceptions of Parent Involvement	Total Participation Activities	Home Visits	Conferences	School Participation	Home Learning Activities	Training	Informal Involvement
Question 1	-0.19	-0.23	-0.13	-0.15	-0.08	-0.16	0.00
Question 2	-0.25	-0.19	-0.17	**-0.27***	-0.16	-0.14	0.05
Question 3	-0.16	-0.09	-0.12	-0.15	-0.07	-0.22	0.00
Question 4	-0.10	-0.14	-0.01	-0.11	-0.05	-0.06	0.00
Question 5	-0.23	**-0.26***	-0.24	**-0.26***	-0.14	**-0.28***	0.21
Question 6	0.09	-0.12	0.24	-0.07	0.04	0.10	0.24
Question 7	-0.14	-0.23	-0.18	-0.16	-0.11	-0.11	0.18
Question 8	-0.04	-0.14	-0.01	-0.02	0.00	-0.06	0.02
Question 9	0.05	-0.20	0.20	0.07	**0.30***	-0.26	-0.12
Question 10	-0.10	-0.08	-0.18	-0.17	-0.07	-0.07	0.17

* **p < 0.05 NOTE:** The response options for this instrument are written as negative for higher responses and positive for lower responses; therefore, negative correlations.

Summary

The focus of this study was on assessing two aspects of parental involvement in "At-Risk" parents involved in a **Teacher-Parent Partnership**...project in three poor rural schools: 1) What are the participation levels and patterns of home and school learning in parents of kindergarten and first-grade children resulting from their involvement in home/school training and involvement activities? 2) What is the relationship between parents' levels and patterns of involvement in home/school training and involvement activities of kindergarten/first-grade children and the parents' perceptions of themselves with regards to the benefits of their involvement? In addition, a function of the study was to explore possible influences related to parental participation levels and patterns.

Data was gathered on the 61 "At-Risk" parents participating in the study using: 1) the **Parent Participation Record**, 2) **The Parent's Perception of Parent Involvement** questionnaire, and 3) the anecdotal records of the Home-School-Workers carrying out the project. Analysis of the data gathered was performed through the use of the Statistical Analysis System (SAS). Question one was tested using the Analysis of Variance and Duncan's Multiple Range Test. Question two was investigated through the utilization of the Pearson Correlation and Duncan's Multiple Range Test.

Siginificant findings related to question one: School 2 had the highest total parent participation; October had the least recorded parent participations (mean 1.48); March had the largest number of parent participations; the average number of parent participations for the year was seven: home-visits and informal parent involvement were the activities in which the largest number of parents participated; and there were significant differences between schools in the participation levels of parents in: conferences, in-classroom/school participation, home learning activities, and informal parent involvement.

The data on question two revealed five signficant correlations between the participation variables and the questions pertaining to parents' perceptions of the benefits of their involvement. Significant correlations existed between: home visits and perceived parent benefits, in-classroom/school involvement and perceived parental involvement in classroom/school activities, in-classroom/school involvement and perceived parent benefits, home learning and perceived weekly participation, and training sessions and perceived parent benefits. Additional correlations between parent participation and perceived benefits of involvement were also suggested by the data.

Observational Data And Discussion

The continuing participation and leadership of the Home-School-Workers provided a rich source of narrative that both reinforced and extended the findings generated through participation records and the questionnaire. Two of the three HSW's kept detailed anecdotal records throughout the project; providing information on parental participation preferences, problems encountered in implementing different participation activities, insights on strategies that proved useful in attracting parents to project events, and a plethora of other valuable information. Their insights (gathered through observation) combined with the more formal data gathered and the ideas offered in the literature provide the basis for this discussion and analysis of the study's findings.

With regards to factors related to the levels and patterns of parent involvement documented, HSW observations offered another dimension. For example, in their perspective, **home visits** were the most consistent form of parental involvement not only because it was an integral part of project activities but also because it met a set of critical parent needs. Some of these needs included: a lack of transportation, parent fear of the school's authority structure, existence of home situations that precluded their visiting the school, inflexible work schedules, a lack of self-confidence with regard to interacting with teachers, and other factors related to scheduling, child care needs, and family situations. Indeed, HSW's noted that as the project gained momentum during the school year many parents called and requested home visits so they and their child could benefit from the project. Gleaned from HSW records were several notations related to "met Anna at her house, baby was sick", "Jean wants me to stop by with the computer, she can't make it to school", and "Calvin must work tonight, wants the videotape on the parenting session sent home". Gordon's (1976) conception of a broad-based approach to parental involvement is supported by the findings in this study; both the data base results and the narrative data.

Attendance and active participation in **parent training sessions** was high when compared to results from other programs that focus on "At-Risk" populations (Swick, 1987; Epstein, 1986). The participation records indicate that most parents attended more than half of the sessions, with a large number of parents attending six of the eight sessions. Further, the traditional drop-off that typically occurs in attendance at parenting programs in the Winter and Spring did not happen in this project. HSW's noted several factors that contributed to high turnouts and to the sustained high level of parental participation: availability of child care, transportation to and from sessions, flexible scheduling of sessions (each topic was offered at least twice), relevancy of session topics to parent concerns, availability of session materials for parents unable to attend (each session was videotaped), relationship between session activities and

the child's learning in school, access to the computer "home loan" program, phone call reminders about meeting times and places, and related support activities carried out by the HSW's.

In contrast to the high level of parental participation in training programs, parents never reached a level of adequacy with regards to carrying out **home learning activities.** While middle class parents apparently engage in continuing home learning involvement with their children, "At-Risk" parents have not seen fit to partake in this critical activity (Epstein, 1986). The one exception to poor parental involvement in usage of home learning activities was parental usage of the computer "home loan" program. **Attendance at computer literacy sessions and the continuing use of the computers in home learning situations was very high.** HSW's noted that in many cases parents wanted to learn how to use a computer as a means of increasing their job possibilities. In addition, they also noted the very high motivation of parents to help their children learn to use computers. HSW notes included references to parent comments in this regard: "he will need to know computers to get a job", "it will help him get ahead in school", "this school is better than last year now that we have computers", and "this will help her in learning better". The demand for computer usage in home learning situations was so high in one district that the PTA acquired another one. In addition, HSW's offered to assist parents in using the computer in the home, thus enhancing their involvement even further. HSW's noted that in many cases a major re-thinking of how the home learning environment takes shape would be needed before participation in this category would increase. Simply put, many parents still did not see their role as teachers occuring in the home.

Conference participation was high in one school and low in both of the other schools. Observational data pointed to the prior history of having regular conferences in the school that had high participation in this category during the project. Neither of the other schools had such a history. Participation in **in-classroom/school activities** (high in one school, adequate in another, and low in the third school) was related to the parent's overall level of involvement, their proximity to the school (with just a few exceptions to the proximity premise noted by the HSW's), the initiative of teachers and HSW's in inviting parents to specific activities, and to the support services (such as transportation) made available to parents.

Informal parent involvement proved to be especially popular in two of the schools. It was also used frequently in the other. HSW's noted that parents who lived a signficant distance from the school, had especially busy or complex family lives, and/or were quite uncomfortable in "formal" school situations, elected this kind of involvement consistently. Another influence was the HSW's many informal contacts with parents to engage them in more formal activities.

Both the formal data results (**Parent Participation Record**) and the HSW's observations confirmed the proposed value of **offering parents diverse kinds of activities** in which to become involved. Since the work of Gordon (1977) and continuing through more recent studies (Swick, 1984; Pence, 1988), diversity of parent involvement opportunities has been strongly recommended. The findings of this study as well as those of Epstein (1986) confirm the utility of this belief. Anecdotal reports by the HSW's noted various situations where parents who could not participate in one kind of involvement did select other options. For example, one mother let a HSW know at the outset that she would participate in school activities but wanted no part of home visits (although later she did indeed engage in home visits). In another case a single-parent mother became heavily involved in home visits and used many home learning activities but (because of distance and family illness) was not involved in the parent training sessions or other school-based activities. In yet another case a single-parent father was active in all of the involvement categories but home visits (he felt it would put the home visitor in an odd situation in that particular community).

Diversity of parent involvement activities available throughout the school year was sited as a strength of the project by parents, teachers, and the home-school-workers. The existence of a full-time paraprofessional who was also a respected member of the community (especially with regards to parents who were minority, at-risk, or both) greatly increased the efficacy of having meaningful teacher-parent relationships. Research notes kept by the project director noted, however, that in some cases teachers became overly dependent upon HSWs to carry out parental involvement. **An impediment in some classrooms to more comprehensive parental involvement was the lack of attention to this aspect of the project by the teacher.** Teacher orientation (especially regarding their prior history of involvement/non-involvement of parents) toward the various parent involvement activities did indeed influence some of the choices parents had available. For example, while one teacher might offer multiple home learning and in-classroom involvement opportunities, another teacher might offer very few activities in these categories. In other words, diversity of involvement might be strongly pursued by the HSWs but impeded by teachers who lacked a similar commitment. Post-project evaluation comments of the HSW's noted that particular categories of involvement in their school could have been stronger with more teacher support. Indeed, the school that had the most in-classroom involvement of parents also had the highest level of teacher commitment to the total project.

Finally, the visibility of available involvement opportunities as well as the level of HSW effort to engage parents in these opportunities was very influential on the ultimate level of parental involvement for each school. The design of one HSW per

three teachers was effective in maintaining the communication essential to keeping parents informed of various participation opportunities. In the one school that exceeded the 1:3 ratio, communication and energy was dispensed in too many directions; thus reducing the number of opportunities for contacting parents. School 2 had the highest communication intensity among the home-school-worker/teacher/parent and the highest level of parent participation. HSW energy (as observed by the project researchers) was a major influence in gaining and sustaining meaningful parental involvement. This was evident in School 3 where the HSW, because of family illness and related work disruptions, was less available than the other HSWs. Total parental involvement in School 3 was the lowest of the schools involved in the project.

Discussion related to **parental participation levels and patterns and their beliefs about the value of these efforts** is directed toward the possible relationships as suggested by the data. **The strongest relationship noted** was that parents who participated in the most home visits were also the parents who felt they benefitted the most from the teacher-parent project. HSW observations confirmed this relationship was indeed strong; noting that parents who requested more home visits were also the parents who, in general, took more initiative to get involved in other project activities. Further, past research (Gordon, 1977) and more recent observations (Comer, 1986) have alluded to the power of home visits in supporting parental initiatives on family improvement issues. Clearly, the high trust level between HSW's and parents was a significant influence on this outcome.

A related (and somewhat unusual) finding was that **high attendance at parent training sessions was also related to parents' positive perceptions of the program's benefits.** Few studies have found such a relationship (Anastasiow, 1988) yet numerous scholars have suggested that such a connection is likely (Cataldo, 1987). Based on parent feedback, teacher obsevations, and the schools' experiences with past parent training efforts, the possible explanation for the correlation found in the results on this project **is the specificity and relationship of training programs offered to the key concepts the children were learning in school.** In effect, parents viewed the programs as meaningful because they had a clear purpose of supporting a school-home learning approach.

Parental participation in classroom/school activities was correlated with two parental attributes: belief in the benefit of the program and perceptions regarding one's level of involvement in the program. These findings are similar to Espstein's (1986), Herman's (1980), and Berlin & Berlin (1975). In effect, parents who show their continuing active support of children's learning via involvement in school activities (especially in the classroom), see this process as valuable and see

themselves as highly involved. Anecdotal data gathered through parent interviews confirmed that highly involved parents not only believed they knew more about how their children learn but also reported higher levels of self confidence as parents.

Implications For Early Childhood Educators

The data generated through the assessment of the **Teacher-Parent Partnership...** project provides a solid foundation for early childhood educators to use in engaging "at-risk" parents and their children in meaningful school-home learning experiences. A very clear message that emanated from this study (given the high participation rates of parents) was that "at-risk" parents want to be involved in their children's educational endeavors. It was also evident that "at-risk" parents confront multiple challenges when it comes to negotiating their relationships with schools and other community agencies. These challenges require that schools use non-traditional modes of parental involvement.

The use of multiple parent involvement strategies under the guidance of small teacher/home-school-worker teams (4:1) who are trained and organized for having close and continuing interactions with parents is most effective. While parental needs are many and must be addressed from a comprehensive perspective, parent/family activities can be most effective when directed toward key concept learning areas that comprise the early childhood curriculum. Parent input and feedback on the involvement process (especially with regards to potential impediments) is essential to identifying needed family supports to make program activities a realistic possibility for parents. The utilization of well planned support resources such as transportation, child care, and related services will strengthen the involvement of parents. Sensitivity to the varying work schedules, family situations, and interests of parents in carrying out parent involvement will further strengthen such programs.

There are steps that early childhood educators can take to increase the involvement of "at-risk" parents in their children's learning and development: develop a formal structure within programs for children that assure the continuing interaction of parents and caregivers/teachers; relate parent involvement and education activities to the "key curriculum areas" that are emphasized in the children's daily program; utilize diverse means of acquiring parental input and feeback on desired

involvement/education opportunities; conduct on-going training with staff on the significant role of parents and parent involvement in early childhood education; offer various supports to parents so as to maximize their involvement in teacher-parent partnership activities; provide multiple involvement opportunities for parents to become engaged in such partnerships; and utilize community personnel (with training) in building school-home relationships.

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